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SUBJECT: LEBANON: DEFMIN MURR EXPLAINS RUSSIANS' "SURPRISE"
MIG OFFER, SAYS WILL NOT ACTUALLY ACCEPT AIRCRAFT

REF: BEIRUT 1748

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Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a December 22 meeting with the Ambassador, Defense Minister Elias Murr struggled to explain that the Russians "surprised" him with a grant aid offer of 77 free T-72 or T-90 tanks and 130 mm mortars, among other equipment, to which he reportedly declined and made the "completely unrealistic" counteroffer to receive MiG-29 fighter aircraft.

After the Russian Defense Minister "trapped" Murr by agreeing to provide ten MiG-29s, Murr said he had "no choice" but to thank the Russians. Murr stated that he intended to delay the process during 2009 through a series of MiG-29 assessments, commencing before the spring 2009 parliamentary elections, to study the Lebanese Armed Forces' (LAF) ability to pay for the associated costs. Murr said he would ultimately reject the offer, after using it to bolster President Michel Sleiman, who had personally asserted the importance of the GOL's relationship with the U.S. in his National Dialogue talks addressing Hizballah's arms, according to Murr.

¶2. (C) Explaining that his negative remarks on international military assistance made from Moscow were directed against the French (and not the USG), Murr agreed to make a positive statement on U.S. support for the LAF during a Future TV interview scheduled to air later the same day. On the issue of funding for the 56 U.S.-supplied M60 tanks requiring GOL approval, Murr indicated he would seek approval from PM Fouad Siniora, and would announce this approval (even if not yet secured) during the same Future TV interview. End summary.

RUSSIA OFFERS TANKS, MORTARS,
SIX PAGES OF EQUIPMENT

13. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by PolOff, met Defense Minister Elias Murr for over 90 minutes at his home in Rabieh on December 22, one day after he had returned from a three-day trip to Moscow (and a stop in Switzerland). Murr immediately said the trip to Russia had been a "huge trap." He recounted his conversations with Russian Ambassador to Lebanon Sergei Boukin and military cooperation chief, Mikhael Dimitriyev, prior to his trip (reftel), during which the officials informed Murr Russia had no plan to offer weapons as grant aid, and could only sell them to Lebanon.

14. (C) After Murr told the Russians that the GOL lacked the budget to support defense acquisitions, the officials reportedly insisted Murr make the trip to Moscow because the Russian government had been inviting Murr for two years and wanted to thank him for his efforts fighting terrorism in Nahr al-Barid in 2007. (Note: The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) captured Chechen fighters in the Palestinian refugee camp, and had turned over at least one Chechen to the Russians. End note.)

15. (C) According to Murr, LAF Chief of Staff Brigadier General Shawki Masri, who had arrived in Moscow a few days before him, reconfirmed to Murr upon his arrival December 14 that there was "no deal on the table" to provide arms to Lebanon. During the first day of Moscow meetings, Murr recounted that the Russian officials informed him they were willing to sell tanks at "very good prices." Murr said he declined, saying the LAF had no money.

16. (C) When he and the accompanying LAF officers met with the Russian Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov, along with the Russian National Security Council SecGen and Dimitriyev on December 16, Murr said his counterpart handed him a six-page document, in Arabic, outlining a "gift to the LAF." Murr said the list included 77 T-72 tanks (which he later referred to as T-90 tanks -- it is unclear which was actually offered), 130mm mortars, and 50 thousand rounds each for the

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tanks and the mortars.

MURR COUNTER-OFFERS SOMETHING
"COMPLETELY UNREALISTIC"

17. (C) Noting that he alone had read the document, Murr said that he passed the list back to his counterpart, thanking him. Murr said he also indicated that the LAF no longer needed what had been offered, and that it had been operating on a three-year defense and training program developed since Nahr al Barid. Murr said he told the Russians that he was receiving Leopard tanks from the Germans and Belgians and M60 tanks and 155mm artillery pieces from the U.S., adding that the LAF officers received training on these specific pieces of equipment. Murr relayed that BG Masri and the other LAF officers were "upset at" his response (as was majority leader Saad Hariri when he was briefed, Murr reported), and urged him to reconsider the offer.

18. (C) According to Murr, the Russian Defense Minister was angry, and retorted, "What is it that you need?" Murr explained (at great length and detail) to the Ambassador that he drummed up what he thought was a most unrealistic request in order to save face, and responded, "MiG fighter aircraft." After reportedly acknowledging the futility of such a request, Serdyukov said he would reconvene with Murr in 25 minutes.

YOU HAVE A DEAL!

19. (C) After what Murr speculated was a telephone call to PM Vladimir Putin, the Russian Defense Minister returned and declared that Russia would give Lebanon 10 MiG-29s, free of charge, according to Murr. Murr said he had thanked his

counterpart, and pointed out to him that he would need to seek cabinet approval to consider the deal. This would entail sending out LAF assessment teams to study the operating costs, training, fuel expenses, etc.

AMMUNITION AGAINST HIZBALLAH

¶10. (C) Murr argued at length that he had no choice but to accept the offer, because if he rejected both the offer of T-72s/T-90s and the MiG-29s, he would be accused of being a "traitor to Lebanon and a pawn to the U.S." He said he could defend why he rejected the six-page offer, but he had no reason to decline the MiGs.

¶11. (C) Murr further reasoned that this offer could be used as "a card against Hizballah," saying, "I am giving President Sleiman something to demonstrate (during the National Dialogue talks) that the LAF has a full program (rendering Hizballah's need for arms useless)." Murr indicated that the announcement of the MiGs from Russia would also bode well for the majority in the lead-up to the spring 2009 parliamentary elections. He said succinctly, "The MiGs are the best tool to f*** up Hizballah, even without possessing them, at the National Dialogue table."

¶12. (C) The Ambassador noted that the Moscow "deal" had led to many questions in Washington. While U.S. public statements would highlight strong international support for Lebanon and the LAF, the stated aim of an MiG-29 acquisition -- counterterror efforts focused on the Palestinian camps -- did not make sense. Furthermore, the associated costs of such an acquisition had not yet been assessed. Where did such an acquisition fit in with USG efforts to secure Cessna Caravans, M-60 tanks, and other equipment (and linked training), she asked.

WILL STALL THE DEAL THROUGHOUT 2009,
THEN SAY "NO"

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¶13. (C) Explaining that accepting the MiGs offer was part of a larger strategy, Murr claimed to the Ambassador that he planned to nominate an LAF Air Force Brigadier General (also a`Qc}\$Q^e the spring 2009 elections (and, ideally, coinciding with his next trip to Washington, he proposed), that would ultimately conclude that the offer is not financially feasible for Lebanon. He argued that he had many pretexts to delay, adding that even the manuals and equipment were written in Russian. "Be sure that I will not consider anything before the end of 2009," Murr declared, "I will dilute this."

SLEIMAN ASSERTED IMPORTANCE
OF RELATIONSHIP WITH U.S.

¶15. (C) Mentioning that he had lunch with President Sleiman the previous day, Murr quoted the President as saying, "The LAF strategy is to be allied with the U.S." Murr said he revealed to Sleiman his strategy of using the MiGs against Hizballah and in the elections, but that he was refraining from telling anyone else, even his father, MP Michel Murr, about his plan. For this reason, Murr said, he hoped the U.S. would also remain quiet about Murr's strategy to ultimately reject the MiGs offer. He claimed that he did not share the six-page list with any of the LAF officers. Ambassador noted that it had been clear that the LAF had had no knowledge of an MiG-29 deal before it was announced.

WILL MAKE A PUBLIC STATEMENT

¶16. (C) Remarking that Murr's December 16 statement from Moscow, in which he said, "We have heard many promises in the past years with respect to equipping the army...some are just mere promises," had not been well-received by the USG, the Ambassador requested that Murr comment positively and publicly on U.S. assistance to the LAF. Pointing out that his remarks were implicitly directed at the French (who he noted have been slow to deliver on the 36 hot missiles for Gazelle helicopters), Murr agreed to speak positively about U.S. assistance during a Future TV interview to be taped later in the day on December 22. He assured the Ambassador that he wholly supported the U.S. programming and appreciated its assistance. He also highlighted his statements to Arabic daily An Nahar, in which he said "Our LAF needs a lot of assistance and the Americans are providing an important part."

FINDING FUNDING FOR M-60S

¶17. (C) Ambassador inquired about the funding sources for the remaining 56 M-60s. She noted that Jordanian and CENTCOM teams were sitting at that minute at the Ministry of Defense attempting to draft an MOU with the LAF. Murr said he had requested to meet PM Fouad Siniora in the evening and would ask him for approval for GOL funding for the M-60s at that time. Murr said that Siniora had previously assured him he would find the needed \$85 million in GOL funds -- reftel. Ambassador noted that if the MOU was not signed with Jordan by year-end, it would be difficult to ensure delivery of the M-60s by spring 2009. Murr noted that Saad Hariri might need to be convinced of the merits of the M-60s versus the Russian tanks. (Note: We believe the amount is \$98 million, in addition to the \$17 million from UAE. End note.)

¶18. (C) Murr added that if he could not meet Siniora before his Future TV interview, he would confirm publicly that the LAF would be receiving M-60s from the U.S. in order to "force" Siniora to fund the remaining amount from the GOL budget. (Note: The M-60 tanks are scheduled to arrive in

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Lebanon before the elections. End note.) Murr and the Ambassador agreed to meet later in the week; Murr noted he would be expected to brief on his Moscow visit at a December 26 or 27 cabinet meeting.

¶19. (C) Comment: Murr's long and meandering account of his Moscow visit is evolving from the versions he recounted last week via LAF Commander Gen. Kahwaji (in a telephone call) and in his telephone conversation with Acting A/S Feltman. However, Murr has for now -- clearly stated that he does not expect MiG-29s in Lebanon. End comment.

SISON